

Amph.
Relig.
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A CHAPTER

FROM

VOLNEY'S RUINS*

TO WHICH IS ADDED

VOLNEY'S ANSWER TO DR. PRIESTLY

UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO
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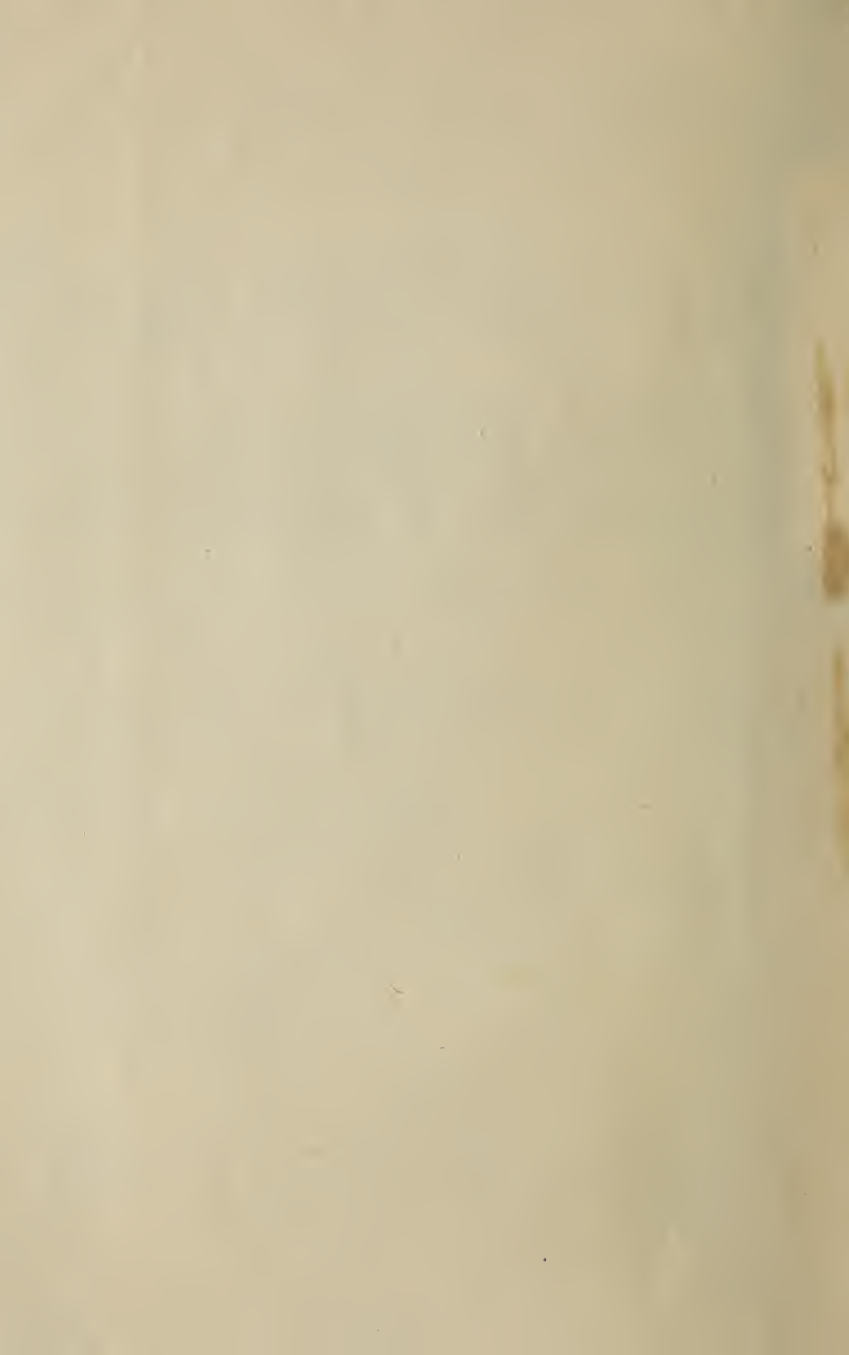
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REPRINT FROM

VOLNEY'S RUINS.

CHAPTER XXIII.

ALL RELIGIONS HAVE THE SAME OBJECT.

THUS spoke the orator in the name of those men who had studied the origin and succession of religious ideas.

The theologians of various systems, reasoning on this discourse: "It is an impious representation," said some, "whose tendency is nothing less than to overturn all belief, to destroy subordination in the minds of men, and annihilate our ministry and power." "It is a romance," said others, "a tissue of conjectures, composed with art, but without foundation." The moderate and prudent men added: "Supposing all this to be true, why reveal these mysteries? Doubtless our opinions are full of errors; but these errors are a necessary restraint on the multitude. The world has gone thus for two thousand years; why change it now?"

A murmur of disapprobation, which never fails to rise at every innovation, now began to increase; when a numerous group of the common classes of people, and of untaught men of all countries and of every nation, without prophets, without doctors, and without doctrine, advancing in the circle, drew the attention of the whole assembly; and one of them, in the name of all, thus addressed the multitude:

"Mediators and arbiters of nations! the strange relations which have occupied the present debate were unknown to us until this day. Our understanding, confounded and amazed at so many statements, some of them learned, others absurd and all incomprehensible, remains in uncertainty and doubt. One only reflection has struck us: on reviewing so many prodigious facts, so many contradictory assertions, we ask ourselves: What are all these discussions to us? What need

have we of knowing what passed five or six thousand years ago, in countries we never heard of, and among men who will ever be unknown to us? True or false, what interest have we in knowing whether the world has existed six thousand, or twenty-five thousand years? Whether it was made of nothing, or of something; by itself, or by a maker, who in his turn would require another maker? What! we are not sure of what happens near us, and shall we answer for what happens in the sun, in the moon, or in imaginary regions of space? We have forgotten our own infancy, and shall we know the infancy of the world? And who will attest what no one has seen? who will certify what no man comprehends?

“ Besides, what addition or diminution will it make to our existence, to answer yes or no to all these chimeras? Hitherto neither our fathers nor ourselves have had the least knowledge or notion of them, and we do not perceive that we have had on this account either more or less of the sun, more or less of subsistence, more or less of good or of evil.

“ If the knowledge of these things is so necessary, why have we lived as well without it as those who have taken so much trouble concerning it? If this knowledge is superfluous, why should we burden ourselves with it to-day?”

Then addressing himself to the doctors and theologians:

“ What!” said he, “ is it necessary that we, poor and ignorant men, whose every moment is scarcely sufficient for the cares of life, and the labors of which you take the profit,—is it necessary for us to learn the numberless histories that you have recounted, to read the quantity of books that you have cited, and to study the various languages in which they are composed! A thousand years of life would not suffice —”

“ It is not necessary,” replied the doctors, “ that you should acquire all this science; we have it for you —”

“ But even you,” replied the simple men, “ with all your science, you are not agreed; of what advantage, then, is your science? Besides, how can you answer for us? If the faith of one man is applicable to many, what need have even you to believe? your fathers may have believed for you; and this would be reasonable, since they have seen for you.

“ Farther, what is believing, if believing influences no ac-

tion? And what action is influenced by believing, for instance, that the world is or is not eternal?"

"The latter would be offensive to God," said the doctors.

"How prove you that?" replied the simple men.

"In our books," answered the doctors.

"We do not understand them," returned the simple men.

"We understand them for you," said the doctors.

"That is the difficulty," replied the simple men. "By what right do you constitute yourselves mediators between God and us?"

"By his orders," said the doctors.

"Where is the proof of these orders?" said the simple men.

"In our books," said the doctors.

"We understand them not," said the simple men; "and how came this just God to give you this privilege over us? Why did this common father oblige us to believe on a less degree of evidence than you? He has spoken to you; be it so; he is infallible, and deceives you not. But it is you who speak to us! And who shall assure us that you are not in error yourselves, or that you will not lead us into error? And if we should be deceived, how will that just God save us contrary to law, or condemn us on a law which we have not known?"

"He has given you the natural law," said the doctors.

"And what is the natural law?" replied the simple men.

"If that law is sufficient, why has he given any other? If it is not sufficient, why did he make it imperfect?"

"His judgments are mysteries," said the doctors, "and his justice is not like that of men."

"If his justice," replied the simple men, "is not like ours, by what rule are we to judge of it? And, moreover, why all these laws, and what is the object proposed by them?"

"To render you more happy," replied a doctor, "by rendering you better and more virtuous. It is to teach man to enjoy his benefits, and not injure his fellows, that God has manifested himself by so many oracles and prodigies."

"In that case," said the simple men, "there is no necessity for so many studies, nor of such a variety of arguments; only tell us which is the religion that best answers the end which they all propose."

Immediately, on this, every group, extolling its own morality above that of all others, there arose among the different sects a new and most violent dispute.

“It is we,” said the Mussulmans, “who possess the most excellent morals, who teach all the virtues useful to men and agreeable to God. We profess justice, disinterestedness, resignation to providence, charity to our brethren, alms-giving, and devotion; we torment not the soul with superstitious fears; we live without alarm, and die without remorse.”

“How dare you speak of morals,” answered the Christian priests, “you, whose chief lived in licentiousness and preached impurity? You, whose first precept is homicide and war? For this we appeal to experience: for these twelve hundred years your fanatical zeal has not ceased to spread commotion and carnage among the nations. If Asia, so flourishing in former times, is now languishing in barbarity and depopulation, it is in your doctrine that we find the cause; in that doctrine, the enemy of all instruction, which sanctifies ignorance, which consecrates the most absolute despotism in the governors, imposes the most blind and passive obedience in the people, that has stupified the faculties of man, and brutalized the nations.

“It is not so with our sublime and celestial morals; it was they which raised the world from its primitive barbarity, from the senseless and cruel superstitions of idolatry, from human sacrifices,* from the shameful orgies of pagan mysteries; they it was that purified manners, proscribed incest and adultery, polished savage nations, banished slavery, and introduced new and unknown virtues, charity for men, their equality in the sight of God, forgiveness and forgetfulness of injuries, the restraint of all the passions, the contempt of worldly greatness, a life completely spiritual and completely holy!”

“We admire,” said the Mussulmans, “the ease with which you reconcile that evangelical meekness, of which you are so ostentatious, with the injuries and outrages with which you

*Read the cold declaration of Eusebius (*Præp. Evang.* lib. 1, p. 11.), who pretends that, since the coming of Christ, there have been neither wars, nor tyrants, nor cannibals, nor sodomites, nor persons committing incest, nor savages destroying their parents, etc. When we read these fathers of the church we are astonished at their insincerity or infatuation.

are constantly galling your neighbors. When you criminate so severely the great man whom we revere, we might fairly retort on the conduct of him whom you adore ; but we scorn such advantages, and confining ourselves to the real object in question, we maintain that the morals of your gospel have by no means that perfection which you ascribe to them ; it is not true that they have introduced into the world new and unknown virtues : for example, the equality of men in the sight of God,—that fraternity and that benevolence which follow from it, were formal doctrines of the sect of the Hermatics or Samaneans,* from whom you descend. As to the forgiveness of injuries, the Pagans themselves had taught it ; but in the extent that you give it, far from being a virtue, it becomes an immorality, a vice. Your so much boasted precept of turning one cheek after the other, is not only contrary to every sentiment of man, but is opposed to all ideas of justice. It emboldens the wicked by impunity, debases the virtuous by servility, delivers up the world to despotism and tyranny, and dissolves all society. Such is the true spirit of your doctrines. Your gospels in their precepts and their parables, never represent God but as a despot without any rules of equity ; a partial father treating a debauched and prodigal son with more favor than his respectful and virtuous children ; a capricious master, who gives the same wages to workmen who had wrought but one hour, as to those who had labored through the whole day ; one who prefers the last comers to the first. The moral is everywhere misanthropic and anti-social ; it disgusts men with life and with society ; and tends only to encourage hermitism and celibacy.

“As to the manner in which you have practised these morals, we appeal in our turn to the testimony of facts. We ask whether it is this evangelical meekness which has excited your interminable wars between your sects, your atrocious persecutions of pretended heretics, your crusades against Arianism, Manicheism, Protestantism, without speaking of your crusades against us, and of those sacrilegious associations, still subsisting, of men who take an oath to continue

* The equality of mankind in a state of nature and in the eyes of God was one of the principal tenets of the Samaneans, and they appear to be the only ancients that entertained this opinion.

them? * We ask you whether it be gospel charity which has made you exterminate whole nations in America, to annihilate the empires of Mexico and Peru; which makes you continue to dispeuple Africa and sell its inhabitants like cattle, notwithstanding your abolition of slavery; which makes you ravage India and usurp its dominions; and whether it be the same charity which, for three centuries past, has led you to harrass the habitations of the people of three continents, of whom the most prudent, the Chinese and Japanese, were constrained to drive you off, that they might escape your chains and recover their internal peace?"

Here the Bramins, the Rabbins, the Bonzes, the Chamans, the Priests of the Molucca islands, and the coasts of Guinea, loading the Christian doctors with reproaches: "Yes!" cried they, "these men are robbers and hypocrites, who preach simplicity, to surprise confidence; humility, to enslave with more ease; poverty, to appropriate all riches to themselves. They promise another world, the better to usurp the present; and while they speak to you of tolerance and charity, they burn, in the name of God, the men who do not worship him in their manner."

"Lying priests," retorted the missionaries, "it is you who abuse the credulity of ignorant nations to subjugate them. It is you who have made of your ministry an art of cheating and imposture; you have converted religion into a traffic of cupidity and avarice. You pretend to hold communications with spirits, and they give for oracles nothing but your wills. You feign to read the stars, and destiny decrees only your desires. You cause idols to speak, and the gods are but the instruments of your passions. You have invented sacrifices and libations, to collect for your own profit the milk of flocks, and the flesh and fat of victims; and under the cloak of piety you devour the offerings of the gods, who cannot eat, and the substance of the people who are forced to labor."

"And you," replied the Bramins, the Bonzes, the Chamans, "you sell to the credulous living, your vain prayers for the souls of the dead. With your indulgences and your absolutions you have usurped the power of God himself; and

* The oath taken by the knights of the Order of Malta, is to kill, or make the Mahometans prisoners, for the glory of God.

making a traffic of his favors and pardons, you have put heaven at auction; and by your system of expiations you have formed a tariff of crimes, which has perverted all consciences.”*

“Add to this,” said the Imans, “that these men have invented the most insidious of all systems of wickedness,—the absurd and impious obligation of recounting to them the most intimate secrets of actions and of thoughts (confessions); so their insolent curiosity has carried their inquisition even into the sanctuary of the marriage bed,† and the inviolable recesses of the heart.”

Thus by mutual reproaches the doctors of the different sects began to reveal all the crimes of their ministry—all the vices of their craft; and it was found that among all nations the spirit of the priesthood, their system of conduct, their actions, their morals, were absolutely the same :

That they had everywhere formed secret associations and corporations at enmity with the rest of society :‡

* As long as it shall be possible to obtain purification from crimes and exemption from punishment by means of money or other frivolous practices; as long as kings and great men shall suppose that building temples or instituting foundations, will absolve them from the guilt of oppression and homicide; as long as individuals shall imagine that they may rob and cheat, provided they observe fast during Lent, go to confession, and receive extreme unction, it is impossible there should exist in society any morality or virtue; and it is from a deep conviction of truth, that a modern philosopher has called the doctrine of expiations *la vérola des sociétés*.

† Confession is a very ancient invention of the priests, who did not fail to avail themselves of that means of governing. It was practised in the Egyptian, Greek, Phrygian, Persian mysteries, etc. Plutarch has transmitted us the remarkable answer of a Spartan whom a priest wanted to confess. “Is it to you or to God I am to confess?” “To God,” answered the priest: “In that case,” replied the Spartan, “man, begone!” (*Remarkable Sayings of the Lacedemonians*.) The first Christians confessed their faults publicly, like the Essenians. Afterwards, priests began to be established, with power of absolution from the sin of idolatry. In the time of Theodosius, a woman having publicly confessed an intrigue with a deacon, bishop Nectarius, and his successor Chrysostom, granted communion without confession. It was not until the seventh century that the abbots of convents exacted from monks and nuns confession twice a year; and it was at a still later period that bishops of Rome generalized it.

The Mussulmen, who suppose women to have no souls, are shocked at the idea of confession; and say; How can an honest man think of listening to the recital of the actions or the secret thoughts of a woman? May we not also ask, on the other hand, how can an honest woman consent to reveal them?

‡ That we may understand the general feelings of priests respecting the rest of mankind, whom they always call by the name of the people, let us hear one of the

That they had everywhere attributed to themselves prerogatives and immunities, by means of which they lived exempt from the burdens of other classes :

That they everywhere avoided the toils of the laborer, the dangers of the soldier, and the disappointments of the merchant :

That they lived everywhere in celibacy, to shun even the cares of a family :

That, under the cloak of poverty, they found everywhere the secret of procuring wealth and all sorts of enjoyments :

That under the name of mendicity they raised taxes to a greater amount than princes :

That in the form of gifts and offerings they had established fixed and certain revenues exempt from charges :

That under pretence of retirement and devotion they lived in idleness and licentiousness :

That they had made a virtue of alms-giving, to live quietly on the labors of others :

doctors of the church. "The people," says Bishop Synnesius, *in Calvil.* page 315, "are desirous of being deceived, we cannot act otherwise respecting them. The case was similar with the ancient priests of Egypt, and for this reason they shut themselves up in their temples, and there composed their mysteries, out of the reach of the eye of the people." And forgetting what he has before just said, he adds: "for had the people been in the secret they might have been offended at the deception played upon them. In the mean time how is it possible to conduct one's self otherwise with the people so long as they are people? For my own part, to myself I shall always be a philosopher, but in dealing with the mass of mankind, I shall be a priest."

"A little jargon," says Geogory Nazianzen to St. Jerome (*Hieron. ad. Nep.*) "is all that is necessary to impose on the people. The less they comprehend, the more they admire. Our forefathers and doctors of the church have often said, not what they thought, but what circumstances and necessity dictated to them."

"We endeavor," says Sanchoniaton, "to excite admiration by means of the marvellous." (*Præp. Evang.* lib. 3.)

Such was the conduct of all the priests of antiquity, and is still that of the Brahmins and Lamas who are the exact counterpart of the Egyptian priests. Such was the practice of the Jesuits, who marched with hasty strides in the same career. It is useless to point out the whole depravity of such a doctrine. In general every association which has mystery for its basis, or an oath of secrecy, is a league of robbers against society, a league divided in its very bosom into knaves and dupes, or in other words agents and instruments. It is thus we ought to judge of those modern clubs, which, under the name of Illuminists, Martinists, Cagliastronists, and Mesmerites, infest Europe. These societies are the follies and deceptions of the ancient Cabalists, Magicians, Orphies, etc., "who," says Plutarch, "led into errors of considerable magnitude, not only individuals, but kings and nations."

That they had invented the ceremonies of worship, as a means of attracting the reverence of the people, while they were playing the parts of gods, of whom they styled themselves the interpreters and mediators, to assume all their powers; that, with this design, they had (according to the degree of ignorance or information of their people) assumed by turns the character of astrologers, drawers of horoscopes, fortune-tellers, magicians,* necromancers, quacks, physicians, courtiers, confessors of princes, always aiming at the great object to govern for their own advantage :

That sometimes they had exalted the power of kings and consecrated their persons, to monopolize their favors, or participate their sway :

That sometimes they had preached up the murder of tyrants (reserving it to themselves to define tyranny), to avenge themselves of their contempt or their disobedience :

And that they always stigmatised with impiety whatever crossed their interests; that they hindered all public instruction, to exercise the monopoly of science; that finally, at all times and in all places, they had found the secret of living in peace in the midst of the anarchy they created, in safety under the despotism that they favored, in idleness amidst the industry they preached, and in abundance while surrounded with scarcity; and all this by carrying on the singular trade of selling words and gestures to credulous people, who purchase them as commodities of the greatest value.†

*What is a magician, in the sense in which people understand the word? A man who by words and gestures pretends to act on supernatural beings, and compel them to descend at his call and obey his orders. Such was the conduct of the ancient priests, and such is still that of all priests in idolatrous nations; for which reason we have given them the denomination of Magicians.

And when a Christian priest pretends to make God descend from heaven, to fix him to a morsel of leaven, and render, by means of this talisman, souls pure and in a state of grace, what is this but a trick of magic? And where is the difference between a Chaman of Tartary who invokes the Genii, or an Indian Bramin, who makes Vichenou descend in a vessel of water to drive away evil spirits? Yes, the identity of the spirit of priests in every age and country is fully established! Every where it is the assumption of an exclusive privilege, the pretended faculty of moving at will the powers of nature; and this assumption is so direct a violation of the right of equality, that whenever the people shall regain their importance, they will forever abolish this sacrilegious kind of nobility, which has been the type and parent stock of the other species of nobility.

† A curious work would be the comparative history of the *agnuses* of the pope and the *pastils* of the grand Lama. It would be worth while to extend this idea

Then the different nations, in a transport of fury, were going to tear in pieces the men who had thus abused them; but the legislator, arresting this movement of violence, addressed the chiefs and doctors :

“What!” said he, “instructors of nations, is it thus that you have deceived them?”

And the terrified priests replied.

“O legislator! we are men. The people are so superstitious! they have themselves encouraged these errors.” *

And the kings said :

“O legislator! the people are so servile and so ignorant! they prostrated themselves before the yoke, which we scarcely dared to show them.” †

Then the legislator, turning to the people — “People!” said he, “remember what you have just heard; they are two indelible truths. Yes, you yourselves cause the evils of which you complain; yourselves encourage the tyrants, by a base adulation of their power, by an imprudent admiration of their false beneficence, by servility in obedience, by licentiousness in liberty, and by a credulous reception of every imposition. On whom shall you wreak vengeance for the faults committed by your own ignorance and cupidity?”

And the people, struck with confusion, remained in mournful silence.

to religious ceremonies in general, and to confront, column by column, the analogous or contrasting points of faith and superstitious practices in all nations. There is one more species of superstition which it would be equally salutary to cure, blind veneration for the great; and for this purpose it would be alone sufficient to write a minute detail of the private life of kings and princes. No work could be so philosophical as this; and accordingly we have seen what a general outcry was excited among kings and the panders of kings, when the *Anecdotes of the Court of Berlin* first appeared. What would be the alarm were the public put in possession of the sequel of this work? Were the people fairly acquainted with all the absurdities of this species of idol, they would no longer be exposed to covet their specious pleasures, of which the plausible and hollow appearance disturbs their peace, and hinders them from enjoying the much more solid happiness of their own condition.

* Consider in this view the Brabanters.

† The inhabitants of Vienna, for example, who harnessed themselves like cattle, and drew the chariot of Leopold.

VOLNEY'S ANSWER TO DR. PRIESTLY.*

SIR.—I received in due time your pamphlet on the increase of infidelity, together with the note without date which accompanied it.† My answer has been delayed by the incidents of business, and even by ill health, which you will surely excuse: this delay has, besides, no inconvenience in it. The question between us is not of a very urgent nature: the world would not go on less well with or without my answer as with or without your book. I might, indeed, have dispensed with returning you any answer at all; and I should have been warranted in so doing, by the manner in which you have stated the debate, and by the opinion pretty generally received that, on certain occasions, and with certain persons, the most noble reply is silence. You seem to have been aware of this yourself, considering the extreme precautions you have taken to deprive me of this resource; but as according to our French customs, any answer is an act of civility, I am not willing to concede the advantage of politeness—besides, although silence is sometimes very significant, its eloquence is not understood by every one, and the public which has not leisure to analyze disputes (often of little interest) has a reasonable right to require at least some preliminary explanations; reserving to itself, should the discussion degenerate into the recriminative clamors of an irritated self-love, to allow the right of silence to him in whom it becomes the virtue of moderation.

I have read, therefore, your animadversions on my *Ruins*, which you are pleased to class among the writings of modern

* In 1797, Dr. Priestly published a pamphlet, entitled, “*Observation on the increase of infidelity, with animadversions upon the writings of several modern unbelievers, and especially the Ruins of Mr. Volney.*” The motto to this tract was:

“Minds of little penetration rest naturally on the surface of things. They do not like to pierce deep into them, for fear of labor and trouble; sometimes still more for fear of truth.”

This Letter is an answer from Volney, taken from the *Anti-Jacobin Review* of March and April, 1799.

† Dr. Priestly sent his pamphlet to Volney, desiring his answer to the strictures on his opinions in his *Ruins of Empires*.

unbelievers, and since you absolutely insist on my expressing my opinion before the public, I shall now fulfill this rather disagreeable task with all possible brevity, for the sake of economizing the time of our readers. In the first place, sir, it appears evidently, from your pamphlet, that your design is less to attack my book than my personal and moral character; and in order that the public may pronounce with accuracy on this point, I submit several passages fitted to throw light on the subject.

You say, in the preface of your discourses, p. 12, "There are, however, unbelievers more ignorant than Mr. Paine, Mr. Volney, Lequino, and others in France say," &c.

Also in the preface of your present observations, p. 20. "I can truly say that in the writings of Hume, Mr. Gibbon, Voltaire, Mr. Volney — there is nothing of solid argument: all abound in gross mistakes and misrepresentations." Idem, p. 38 — "Whereas had he (Mr. Volney) given attention to the history of the times in which Christianity was promulgated. . . he could have no more doubt. . . &c., it is as much in vain to argue with such a person as this, as with a Chinese or even a Hottentot."

Idem, p. 119 — "Mr. Volney, if we may judge from his numerous quotations of ancient writers in all the learned languages, oriental as well as occidental, must be acquainted with all; for he makes no mention of any translation, and yet if we judge from this specimen of his knowledge of them, he cannot have the smallest tincture of that of the Hebrew or even of the Greek."

And, at last, after having published and posted me in your very title page, as an unbeliever and an infidel; after having pointed me out in your motto as one of those superficial spirits who know not how to find out, and are unwilling to encounter, truth; you add, p. 124, immediately after an article in which you speak of me under all these denominations —

"The progress of infidelity, in the present age, is attended with a circumstance which did not so frequently accompany it in any former period, at least, in England, which is, that unbelievers in revelation generally proceed to the disbelief of the being and providence of God so as to become properly Atheists." So that, according to you, I am a Chinese, a Hotten-

tot, an unbeliever, an Atheist, an ignoramus, a man of no sincerity; whose writings are full of nothing but gross mistakes and misrepresentations. Now I ask you, sir, What has all this to do with the main question? What has my book in common with my person? And how can you hold any converse with a man of such bad connexions? In the second place, your invitation, or rather, your summons to me, to point out the mistakes which *I think you have made with respect to my opinions*, suggest to me several observations.

First. You suppose that the public attaches a high importance to your mistakes and to my opinions: but I cannot act upon a supposition. Am I not an unbeliever?

Secondly. You say, p. 18, that the public *will expect it from me*: Where are the powers by which you make the public speak and act? Is this also a revelation?

Thirdly. You require me to point out your mistakes. I do not know that I am under any such obligation: I have not reproached you with them; it is not, indeed, very correct to ascribe to me, by selection or indiscriminately, as you have done, all the opinions scattered through my book, since, having introduced many different persons, I was under the necessity of making them deliver different sentiments, according to their different characters. The part which belongs to me is that of a traveler, resting upon the ruins and meditating on the causes of the misfortunes of the human race. To be consistent with yourself you ought to have assigned to me that of the Hottentot or Samoyde savage, who argues with the Doctors, chap. xxiii, and I should have accepted it; you have preferred that of the erudite historian, chap. xxii, nor do I look upon this as a mistake; I discover on the contrary, an insidious design to engage me in a duel of self-love before the public, wherein you would excite the exclusive interest of the spectators by supporting the cause which they approve; while the task which you would impose on me, would only, in the event of success, be attended with sentiments of disapprobation. Such is your artful purpose, that, in attacking me as doubting the existence of Jesus, you might secure to yourself, by surprise, the favor of every Christian sect, although your own incredulity in his divine nature is not less subversive of Christianity than the profane opinion, which does not find in history the proof

required by the English law to establish a fact : to say nothing of the extraordinary kind of pride assumed in the silent, but palpable, comparison of yourself to Paul and to Christ, by likening your labors to theirs as tending to the same object, p. 10, preface. Nevertheless, as the first impression of an attack always confers an advantage, you have some ground for expecting you may obtain the apostolic crown ; unfortunately for your purpose I entertain no disposition to that of martyrdom : and however glorious it might be to me to fall under the arm of him who has overcome Hume, Gibbon, Voltaire and even Frederick II., I find myself under the necessity of declining your theological challenge, for a number of substantial reasons.

1. Because, to religious quarrels there is no end, since the prejudices of infancy and education almost unavoidably exclude impartial reasoning, and besides, the vanity of the champions becomes committed by the very publicity of the contest, never to give up a first assertion, whence result a spirit of sectarianism and faction.

2. Because no one has a right to ask of me an account of my religious opinions. Every inquisition of this kind is a pretension to sovereignty, a first step towards persecution ; and the tolerant spirit of this country, which you invoke, has much less in view to engage men to speak, than to invite them to be silent.

3. Because, supposing I do hold the opinions you attribute to me, I wish not to engage my vanity so as never to retract, nor to deprive myself of the resource of a conversion on some future day after more ample information.

4. And because, reverend sir, if, in the support of your own thesis, you should happen to be discomfited before the Christian audience, it would be a dreadful scandal ; and I will not be a cause for scandal, even for the sake of good.

5. Because in this metaphysical contest our arms are too unequal ; you speaking in your mother tongue, which I scarcely lisp, might bring forth huge volumes, while I could hardly oppose pages ; and the public, who would read neither production, might take the weight of the books for that of reasoning.

6. And because, being endowed with the gift of faith in a

pretty sufficient quantity, you might swallow in a quarter of an hour more articles than my logic would digest in a week.

7. Because again, if you were to oblige me to attend your sermons, as you have compelled me to read your pamphlet, the congregation would never believe that a man powdered and adorned like any worldling, could be in the right against a man dressed out in a large hat, *with straight hair*,* and a mortified countenance, although the gospel, speaking of the pharisees of other times, who were unpowdered, says that when one fasts he must anoint his head and wash his face.†

8. Because, finally, a dispute to one having nothing else to do would be a gratification, while to me, who can employ my time better, it would be an absolute loss.

I shall not then, reverend sir, make you my confessor in matters of religion, but I will disclose to you my opinion, as a man of letters, on the composition of your book. Having in former days, read many works of theology, I was curious to learn whether by any chemical process you had discovered real beings in that world of invisibles. Unfortunately, I am obliged to declare to the public, which, according to your expression, p. 19, "hopes to be instructed, to be led into truth, and not into error by me," that I have not found in your book a single new argument, but the mere repetition of what is told over and over in thousands of volumes, the whole fruit of which has been to procure for their authors a cursory mention in the dictionary of heresies. You everywhere lay down that as proved which remains to be proved; with this peculiarity, that, as Gibbon says, firing away your double battery against those who believe too much, and those who believe too little, you hold out your own peculiar sensations, as to the precise criterion of truth; so that we must all be just of your size in order to pass the gate of that New Jerusalem which you are building. After this, your reputation as a divine might have become problematical with me; but recollecting the principle of the association of ideas so well developed by Locke, whom you hold in estimation, and whom, for that reason I am happy to cite to you, although to him I owe that pernicious use of my

* Dr. Priestly has discarded his wig since he went to America, and wears his own hair. Editor A. J. Reveiw.

† St. Matthew, Chapter VI. verses 16 and 17.

understanding which makes me disbelieve what I do not comprehend—I perceive why the public having originally attached the idea of talents to the name of Mr. Priestly, doctor in chemistry, continued by habit to associate it with the name of Mr. Priestly, doctor in divinity; which, however, is not the same thing: an association of ideas the more vicious as it is liable to be moved inversely.* Happily you have yourself raised a bar of separation between your admirers, by advising us in the first page of your preface, that your present book is especially destined for believers. To coöperate, however, with you, sir, in this judicious design, I must observe that it is necessary to retrench two passages, seeing they afford the greatest support to the arguments of unbelievers.

You say, p. 15, "What is manifestly contrary to natural reason cannot be received by it;"—and p. 62, "With respect to intellect, men and brute animals are born in the same state, having the same external senses, which are the only inlets to all ideas, and consequently the source of all the knowledge and of all the mental habits they ever acquire."

Now if you admit, with Locke, and with us infidels, that every one has the right of rejecting whatever is contrary to his natural reason, and that all our ideas and all our knowledge are acquired only by the inlets of our external senses; What becomes of the system of revelation, and of that order of things in times past, which is so contradictory to that of the time present? unless we consider it as a dream of the human brain during the state of superstitious ignorance.

With these two single phrases, I could overturn the whole edifice of your faith. Dread not, however, sir, in me such overflowing zeal. For the same reason that I have not the frenzy of martyrdom, I have not that of making proselytes. It becomes those ardent, or rather acrimonious tempers, who mistake the violence of their sentiments for the enthusiasm of truth; the ambition of noise and rumor, for the love of

* Mr. Blair, doctor of divinity, and Mr. Black, doctor in chemistry, met at the coffee house in Edinburg: a new theological pamphlet written by doctor Priestly was thown upon the table, "Really," said Dr. Blair, "this man had better confine himself to chemistry, for he is absolutely ignorant in theology:"—"I beg your pardon," answered Dr. Black, "he is in the right, he is a minister of the gospel, he ought to adhere to his profession, for in truth he knows nothing of chemistry."

glory ; and for the love of their neighbor, the detestation of his opinions, and the secret desire of dominion.

As for me, who have not received from nature the turbulent qualities of an apostle, and never sustained in Europe the character of a dissenter, I am come to America neither to agitate the conscience of men, nor to form a sect, nor to establish a colony, in which, under the pretext of religion, I might erect a little empire to myself. I have never been seen evangelizing my ideas, either in temples or in public meetings. I have never likewise practiced that quackery of beneficence, by which a certain divine, imposing a tax upon the generosity of the public, procures for himself the honors of a more numerous audience, and the merit of distributing at his pleasure a bounty which costs him nothing, and for which he receives grateful thanks dexterously stolen from the original donors.

Either in the capacity of a stranger, or in that of a citizen, a sincere friend to peace, I carry into society neither the spirit of dissension, nor the desire of commotion ; and because I respect in every one what I wish him to respect in me, the name of liberty is in my mind nothing else but the synonyma of justice.

As a man, whether from moderation or indolence, a spectator of the world rather than an actor in it, I am every day less tempted to take on me the management of the minds or bodies of men : it is sufficient for an individual to govern his own passions and caprices.

If by one of these caprices, I am induced to think it may be useful, sometimes, to publish my reflections, I do it without obstinacy or pretension to that implicit faith, the ridicule of which you desire to impart to me, p. 123. My whole book of the *Ruins* which you treat so ungratefully, since you thought it amusing, p. 122, evidently bears this character. By means of the contrasted opinions I have scattered through it, it breathes that spirit of doubt and uncertainty which appears to me the best suited to the weakness of the human mind, and the most adapted to its improvement, inasmuch as it always leaves a door open to new truths ; while the spirit of dogmatism and immovable belief, limiting our progress to a first received opinion, binds us at hazard, and without resource, to the yoke

of error or falsehood, and occasions the most serious mischiefs to society ; since by combining with the passions, it engenders fanaticism, which, sometimes misled and sometimes misleading, though always intolerant and despotic, attacks whatever is not of its own nature ; drawing upon itself persecution when it is weak, and practising persecution when it is powerful ; establishing a religion of terror, which annihilates the faculties, and vitiates the conscience : so that, whether under a political or a religious aspect, the spirit of doubt is friendly to all ideas of liberty, truth, or genius, while a spirit of confidence is connected with the ideas of tyranny, servility, and ignorance.

If, as is the fact, our own experience and that of others daily teaches us that what at one time appeared true, afterwards appeared demonstrably false, how can we connect with our judgments that blind and presumptuous confidence which pursues those of others with so much hatred ?

No doubt it is reasonable, and even honest, to act according to our present feelings and conviction : but if these feelings and their causes do vary by the very nature of things, how dare we impose upon ourselves or others an invariable conviction ? How, above all, dare we require this conviction in cases where there is really no sensation, as happens in purely speculative questions, in which no palpable fact can be presented ?

Therefore, when opening the book of nature, (a more authentic one and more easy to be read than leaves of paper blackened over with Greek or Hebrew,) and when I reflected that the slightest change in the material world has not been in times past, nor is at present effected by the difference of so many religions and sects which have appeared and still exist on the globe, and that the course of the seasons, the path of the sun, the return of rain and drought, are the same for the inhabitants of each country, whether Christians, Mussulmans, Idolaters, Catholics, Protestants, etc., I am induced to believe that the universe is governed by laws of wisdom and justice, very different from those which human ignorance and intolerance would enact.

And as in living with men of very opposite religious persuasions, I have had occasion to remark that their manners

were, nevertheless, very analagous; that is to say, among the different Christian sects, among the Mahometans, and even among those people who were of no sect, I have found men who practise all the virtues, public and private, and that too without affectation; while others, who were incessantly declaiming of God and religion, abandoned themselves to every vicious habit which their belief condemned, I thereby became convinced that Ethics, the doctrines of morality, are the only essential, as they are only demonstrable, part of religion. And as, by your own avowal, the only end of religion is to render men better, in order to add to their happiness, p. 62, I have concluded that there are but two great systems of religion in the world, that of good sense and beneficence, and that of malice and hypocrisy.

In closing this letter, I find myself embarrassed by the nature of the sentiment which I ought to express to you, for in declaring as you have done, p. 123, that you do not care for the contempt of such as me* (ignorant as you were of my opinion), you tell me plainly that you do not care for their esteem. I leave, therefore, to your discernment and taste to determine the sentiment most congenial to my situation and your desert.

C. F. VOLNEY.

Philadelphia, March 10, 1797.

P. S. I do not accompany this public letter with a private note to Dr. Priestly, because communications of that nature carry an appearance of bravado, which, even in exercising the right of a necessary defence, appear to me incompatible with decency and politeness.

* "And what does it do for me here, except, perhaps, expose me to the contempt of such men as Mr. Volney, which, however, I feel myself pretty well able to bear?" p. 124. This language is the more surprising, as Dr. Priestly never received anything from me but civilities. In the year 1791 I sent him a dissertation of mine on the *Chronology of the Ancients*, in consequence of some charts which he had himself published. His only answer was to abuse me in a pamphlet in 1792. After this first abuse, on meeting me here last winter, he procured me an invitation to dine with his friend Mr. Russell, at whose house he lodged; after having shown me polite attention at that dinner, he abuses me in his new pamphlet. After this second abuse he meets me in Spruce Street, and takes me by the hand as a friend, and speaks of me in a large company under that denomination. Now I ask the public, what kind of a man is Dr. Priestly?

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Author Volney, Constantin François Chasseboeuf,

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